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ABSTRACT

Policy issues in the area of early childhood education are discussed in this document prepared for the Chief State School Officers of the Northwest and Pacific. Particular attention is given to: (1) the scope of early childhood education; (2) academic, developmental, economic, and political purposes of early childhood education; (3) targeted groups; (4) shared responsibilities of stakeholders; (5) certification and credentialing; and (6) determination of who does and does not benefit from programs. It is concluded that even though the dichotomy between education and care is probably necessary for policy purposes, the dichotomy does not reflect the intrinsic interconnection of care and education. Because education and care are unified in the child, services should be child-centered, and the viewpoints of families, agencies, and institutions that impinge on the child must be understood and respected. (RH)

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THE Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

PROGRAM REPORT

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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: POLICY ISSUES

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Prepared for the Chief State School Officers of the Northwest and Pacific

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August 1, 1989

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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: POLICY ISSUES

Early childhood programs represent one of the most important developments in contemporary education, taking a wide range of approaches, attracting widespread popular and professional support, and in the process engendering sharp controversies among and between supporters and detractors. Great progress is being made in the states but some unresolved problems exist.

Many of these unresolved problems are in the area of policy: a clear-cut explication of the direction which has been established within a state for the overall program or at least for some of its component parts. The principles upon which the programs have been established—the basic assumptions and beliefs about the values and importance of the early childhood years—are often clearly articulated, and the practices—how the programs are operated—can be described in meticulous detail, but a clear sense of overall direction is not so easy to determine. The educational policies which undergird the programs need further examination.

However, determining what these policies are—or what policy options might be available—is enormously complicated by the fact that there are so many interlocking levels of policy making. It may seem like a needless repetition of an elementary lesson in beginning civics to emphasize that the ultimate determiner of public policy—in this as in any other issue of national importance—is the body politic itself, "the people," as both demagogues and genuine leaders like to call them. Today, "the people" are generally—but by no means universally—supportive of a greater range of early childhood programs than those traditionally acceptable. The care, nurture, and upbringing of children, formerly considered to be purely "family" concerns, are now increasingly being seen as public issues as well, amenable to some degree of governmental intervention or at least government participation, although the boundaries between familial and social responsibilities lack both clear definition and solid consensus.

Leaders of the major national political parties have been alert to sense this shift to a desire for more "early intervention" in the upbringing and education of children, a development leading to a remark by the syndicated columnist James Kilpatrick that this past year both political parties were in "a baby-kissing mood."

Translating this interest into substantive legislation at the congressional level is a first step in establishing a national early childhood policy, though it is well to remember that much of the legislation which is proposed is never passed; that which is passed is almost always altered (improved or mangled, as the case may be, by subsequent legislative compromises); and that the initial legislation finally approved is typically just an authorization bill, calling for the subsequent appropriation of "such sums as may be necessary to carry out the provisions of this act." Actual appropriations are usually in a substantially smaller amount, so that the policy—direction—expressed in the legislation does not become the de facto national policy at all, but merely an expression of what Congress considers to be the national will with respect to an important national issue.

At the state level, then, policy makers may find that they have some of the options foreclosed or some of the initiatives pre-empted by congressional action, so that actual state policy is determined not wholly at the state-level, but at the national as well. This does not mean at all that state-level policy makers cannot forge ahead, as several of the states in the Northwest have done. They have instituted programs before the federal government has provided the authorization or the money, and have developed their own state policies and programs which build on but transcend the limitations of the federal legislation or funding.

Some of the complexities of trying to ascertain just who are the state-level policy makers in the area of early childhood services stem not primarily from the necessity of the states' usually following, rather than leading, the federal initiatives; rather, it is the division of labor among the branches and agencies of state government which complicates the issue.

It is quite common for critics of state government to attribute the problems arising from what is seen as "competition" among the branches of state government to "jealousy," "organizational protectionism," and an ingrained tendency toward "turf-building." There is some of all of these attitudes, of course, but the real problems often arise from different perceptions of legal responsibilities and different beliefs about what is in the best interest of the people of the state—in this case, the children. The Office of the Governor sees its overall responsibility for the direction the state takes as requiring that as many programs as possible be kept under the direct or fairly direct supervision of that office; hence, in some states, responsibility for early childhood programs is assigned, insofar as federal and state legislation permit, to some branch of the governor's office, such as a Department of Economic Development. The Legislature quite legitimately sees itself as responsible for the passing of all statutes and the appropriation of all funds; thus it is inclined to place responsibility for the administration of new or expanded early childhood services in agencies over which it feels the legislature has greater control—perhaps a Department of Health and Human Services or an Office of Child Development. The State Board of Education, as a constitutional or statutory body required to oversee all programs of an educational nature, feels with equal legitimacy that they should have ultimate responsibility for all early childhood programs that are even tangentially educational in nature.

Well-planned interagency task forces may help resolve some of the issues, but the formal agencies of state government are not the only problem because they are not the only potential decision makers: private organizations enter the picture as well. The school boards associations and the "umbrella" administrators and teachers organizations assert the right to have a substantive voice in how early childhood programs are conducted. Special-concern groups (which are often a bit unfairly dismissed as "special interest organizations") speak with a strong and sometimes strident voice to the needs of the handicapped, the victims of impoverished home lives, the often-neglected minorities, and of all children who for any reason may be considered as potentially "at risk."

The individual family—although neither "agency" nor "organization" nor yet a formal member of the policy-forming hierarchy—the family still has and deserves a dominant voice in the decision-making process. It is the family (and the word is meant to include not only the parents, but also relatives who may act as surrogates for at least part of the time, as well as the neighbor down the street who cares for a few children, for whatever fee arrangement, in a family-like setting) that makes the primary decisions about what direction they want their early childhood policy to take.

With so many actors quite legitimately on the scene, the answer to the question, "Who makes the decisions?" cannot be easily given. But whoever makes the policy decisions about early childhood services will have to face the same set of policy issues.

Policy Issues

Policy in the area of early childhood education is greatly complicated by two factors—the highly-charged emotional climate which pervades the whole field and the complex political maneuverings which determine what programs will be supported, and at what level.

The emotional and political considerations are very similar to those which pervade the whole area of special education: no educator wishes to seem insensitive to the desire of parents for what they deem to be the most appropriate and highest-quality program needed by their child or children; and no one in an education policy-making position, government official or appointed administrator, can be oblivious to the fact that many decisions of a political nature must be made in a political context, and carried out in the political arena. In short, no educator and no elected/appointed official can seem to be "against children."

With these conditions existing, decisions on many policy issues must be made which involve sensitive and complex issues. Some of these policy issues—those which are not simply statements of cherished principles, nor yet specific descriptions of operational procedures—are analyzed in the sections which follow. Just because these are called "policy" issues does not mean that they are divorced from reality: they are crucial, real-world problems.

Scope

An initial decision to be made by policy formulators at every level where significant decisions can be made is simply that of scope—what direction are we going to take as we determine what we mean by "early childhood programs?" The range of programs actually in place, being planned, or even being tentatively proposed include the following:

- Kindergarten
- Head Start
- Other public prekindergarten
- Child care
- Before- and after-school care
- Handicapped early intervention

Although not techically "programs," primary sources of early childhood care and education are the services provided by individuals and groups in the private sector: family and relatives, churches and other needs-serving groups, and the lady-down-the streeet who looks after a few children in her home.

One form of early childhood programmatic "intervention" that is emerging which defies categorizing with traditional or even innovative programs aimed at the child-client is parent education, a service which is provided most often to those who come from impoverished households or to teen-aged parents, but which might be expanded to include the parents of all children who are likely to fall into one of the at-risk categories.

Since it is highly unlikely that all of these programs can at once find public acceptance and support, can be conducted within the constraints of existing agencies, institutions, organizations, or governmental or private entities of any sort, or can be adequately funded even if publicly acceptable and administratively feasible, choices will have to be made. At any level of decision-making (but especially at the state level, which is the primary focus of this study) the decision of what to include and what to exclude seems to be the place to start—but only after the fundamental purposes and objectives have been clearly established.

Fundamental Purposes

Determining, articulating, and adopting fundamental purposes and objectives for early childhood programs are essential steps in deciding the direction in which to steer the programs. It is probably not possible or even desirable for policy makers at any level of the decision-making process to attempt to set a single, overriding purpose, or to establish a strict hierarchy of purposes in descending order of importance. But almost surely there will emerge, after careful planning and deliberation, a very few major purposes and directions which will govern the entire range of programs to be offered.

It is not uncommon for persons trying to sort out these fundamental purposes to assume that there is basically a clear-cut dichotomy which has to be resolved: are the programs to be considered primarily educational, or are they to be primarily custodial? But this relatively simple choice which seems to be available is really much more complex than appears. There are not two, but many purposes which early childhood programs can be designed to accomplish.

Certainly, one of major importance is equity. Simple fairness requires that all children, of whatever background or ability, ought to have a chance for an even start—and a continuing opportunity to proceed through childhood, through youth, and into adulthood without any unnecessary limitation imposed by lack of appropriate opportunities.

Another purpose, sometimes overlooked in an attempt to find wholly logical and rational reasons for instituting and supporting early childhood programs is compassion. Kids deserve not only a fair and equitable opportunity—they deserve to be treated with warmth and affection—to feel loved, valued, wanted. That may well be the major reason for programs provided for latch-key children: not necessarily so that both parents may work, nor that the children will escape conditions that might cause educational deprivation, nor that—left to their own resources—they might develop patterns of delinquency. These are all good reasons, but the best reason is that no child should be left out in the cold, either literally or figuratively.

The academic purposes are not to be decried. Concerned that we may be on the way to developing the Japanese parental syndrome—push the youngsters early and hard toward academic success, make preschool into kindergarten and kindergarten into first grade, and so on—some critics have maintained that there should be virtually no academic emphasis until formal schooling is begun. Surely, the experience with Head Start, buttressed by significant research findings, demonstrates quite clearly that there needs to be strong intellectual, if not specifically academic, component in most early childhood programs.

The developmental purpose is likewise a worthy one. Psychological growth, motor-skills, experiences, and social development in the young child are all crucial concerns, as is normal physical development assured and enhanced by adequate diet, continuous professional observation of physical health, and a favorable emotional climate which reduces the chance of stress-related ailments. Development into happy, healthful, and productive adulthood, we know conclusively, is a continuous process, starting at or before birth and continuing throughout the childhood years.

The economic purposes to be served by many of the early childhood programs is attracting major attention at both the national and state-house levels. Many convergent forces are forcing or enticing a great number of mothers into the labor market at a time when the labor pool is shrinking. It is not only advantageous (or necessary) to the parent to have adequate, affordable day care (or extended school-day care) available; it is to the economic advantage of the local community, the state, and the nation to have this extra economic-development boost: more mothers (or other home-care providers) in the labor market, economically more secure, producing needed goods and services—and at the same time comfortable in the knowledge that their children are being adequately cared for.

A final purpose for early childhood programs is unabashedly political: supporting such programs is politically astute; opposing them (or even dragging one's feet) can put anyone who must be responsive to the political process at a severe disadvantage. Beyond these relatively self-protective reasons for giving support to such programs, however, is a much more significant consideration: it is only through the political process that programs can be initiated and sustained.

Some proponents of early childhood programs feel very uncomfortable with any linking of these programs with politics: "Let's leave politics out of this; don't mix politics with programs for kids!" But politics is simply the mechanism we have in a democracy for the allocation of power and resources to make certain things happen and to keep other things from happening. Without politics there couldn't be programs.

Targets

When scope and purposes have been established by the appropriate policy makers, one more question of direction arises: within the chosen programs, and given the established purposes, what designated groups shall be specially targeted? This is a highly judgmental matter; there are scarcely any "correct" criteria, and no established guidelines. To the extent permitted under federal legislation, these decisions remain the perogative—and the duty—of state authorities, particularly education authorities, with decisions most appropriately made according to the distinctive needs of the state. Even more likely, these decisions can most effectively be made in conjunction with the local boards of education and the administrators and teachers of the individual district. Needs are quintessentially site-specific; therefore, many questions of specific populations to be targeted may often be delegated—under such broad state and district guidelines as may be necessary—to the community level.

Whether the choice is made to target specific age-groups, those with special academic needs, the disadvantaged or the handicapped, all at-risk children, whatever the choice, it is inevitably a cooperative decision, one involving the several levels of policy makers, the professional staff most involved, and the community and parent groups who have legitimate concerns.

Shared Responsibilities

Emphasis on the desirability of involving parents and community groups points to the importance of another policy issue: the direction to be taken in sharing responsibilities and ensuring maximum involvement of all who have a stake in the early childhood education programs. The range of actors who have a legitimate role to play in the decision-making process has been suggested in the paragraphs above in which the related responsibilities of the various levels of governmental organizations were described. But beyond these official levels and the specific agencies of government which are necessarily involved, others must play a part along with the schools, most notably the private sector and the family.

The responsibilities for early childhood programs tend to fall (although far from neatly) into three categories: for each group, organization, or agency there are responsibilities which are primary, secondary, and shared. Just how the tripartite list of such responsibilities might be allocated between and among the groups which must be involved is an organizational and procedural matter beyond the scope of this paper. The important point is simply that the policy-formulation process is incomplete until this problem has been faced and solved.

It is an especially troublesome problem because of understandable family sensibilities about the state's intruding into family life. We speak of "early intervention" as one means of assuring that the programs might have the greatest chance of success, but what educators (and those who legislate, for that matter) see as intervention the family may well regard as intrusion. The only concrete suggestions for policy formulation in this sensitive area which would seem to be undeniably appropriate are these: leaning over backwards to protect the family's sense of privacy (which may well mean going far beyond the requirements of official privacy legislation); and establishing the requisite policies (including provisions for the resolution of complaints) before the problems occur.

Certification and Credentialing

Potential agreements regarding how various agencies and organizations which might be assigned a participatory role in administering early childhood programs not infrequently bog down on the question of how to have some control over the quality of the services that are to be provided. "Quality assurance," some like to call it; but since no certificate or credential has ever assured quality, perhaps the best we can hope for is a system which will keep at least the hopelessly unqualified person from working directly with children, and at the same time provide the standards, the training, and the funds to upgrade personnel.

The problem involves not only the state agencies which may have widely varying standards for credentialing those who work with children, but more perplexing, the private-sector groups, both nonprofit and proprietary, which may or may not have some kind of standards (enforced or otherwise)—groups ranging from established private kindergartens, perhaps officially accredited, to the casual a-few-children-in-a-private-home "day care center." Not only is the absence of any standards or evidence of even minimal competency a problem; the strong resistance to coming under any sort of what is seen as "bureaucratic control" characterizes the attitude of most program operators in the private sector.

Just who does what is something to be worked out procedurally; whether the state education agency or some other state agency issues the agreed-upon certificate credential, or license, for example, is not really a fundamental policy matter. What is a policy issue is this: deciding what direction the state wants to take (in consultation with local authorities and others who are appropriately concerned) and—working through interagency task forces if that will get the job done—coming up with a statewide agreement. With a basic policy established, the details can be worked out.

The Fiscal Triage

Perhaps the most vexatious of the policy issues has been left to the last, because it is one that almost everyone working in the field of early childhood programs (or anywhere else in education for that matter) would rather avoid: who gets left out?

As every devoted follower of the late-lamented program M*A*S*H remembers, "triage" is the name applied in military medical circles to the decision-system which is used to divide the wounded who have been brought in from the battlefront into three groups: those who are going to make it anyway; those for whom little or nothing can be done; and those who, with prompt surgical treatment, have a good chance of surviving/recovering. It is a tough—a ruthless—system; but it has long been successfully applied to save the maximum number of lives with the limited resources available.

It may be argued that the triage option of neglecting or giving up on one group—those who probably can't be helped much anyway—might indeed be an option available, even mandated, under battlefield conditions, but it is not one available in a human-service setting. No government agency, some maintain, could afford, practically or politically, to write off any group of children.

Actually, of course, it is not a matter of leaving the children (to use the military analogy a bit further) to perish on the battlefield, as it were. Somebody will do something for them. Very limited governmental resources, at one or more levels, may be made available to them on what may unfortunately have to be a low-priority basis. But the tremendous range of resources in the private sector can also be counted on to help. Again, it will be principally the family (as the word is used earlier in this paper) but also the private youth-serving organizations of all sorts that may have to be relied upon to meet the needs that governmental agencies cannot.

There is precedent for making such hard choices at the governmental level, choices about who gets slighted or left out of programs. The National Science Foundation has for a number of years commonly made decisions about which particular medical research to fund—and which not to fund—based primarily on statistical projects of the comparative number of lives which might potentially be saved. Medicare and Medicaid authorities have made decisions regarding a cut-off age for subsidizing organ transplants for the elderly, based on the perhaps unfeeling rationale that when recipients are over a certain age limit, the possible benefits to society are outweighed by the societal benefits of putting the money elsewhere. Military commanders routinely assess battle plan options in terms of "acceptable" level of projected fatalities. All of these decisions have proved both "practical" and politically survivable.

Those who are in policy-making positions in education are likely to be faced with triage-like decisions. No matter what political rhetoric may promise, no matter what authorization bills may say about "such sums as are necessary," no matter what organizations may promise their members, or government agencies promise their constituencies, there is not in any forseeable future going to be enough money for all of the early childhood programs for all of the children. No way!

So, what do the policy makers do? Do they decide that some children are going to make it anyway, so no programs for them? Do they decide that some children are really beyond help, so forget them? Do they then decide, that with the money thus saved, they can mount really good, really well-funded programs for the large majority which have fallen into neither of the other groups? Or do they modify programs so that they can be supported at levels which will provide the maximum betterment of the early childhood environment consistent with other needs and with the funds available?

An impossible set of questions to answer, the reader may say. But others may remind us that perhaps we should have faced this issue a number of years ago with respect to special education, but everybody was afraid of it.

Perhaps we still are.

In Conclusion

Early childhood programs are often thought of as encompassing two separate concerns, "education" and "care." This is an unfortunate dichotomizing, although probably a necessary one for clarifying/describing the two emphases for such practical, public-policy purposes as determining assignment of organizational responsibilities and for making fiscal analyses and providing financial support. In reality, they are intrinsically intertwined: all early childhood education includes elements of childhood care, and all child care, even the most routine, has potential educational components with positive or negative aspects.

What really pulls the two together, however, is not the interrelatedness of the efforts or the effects; the unifying force is the primary focus of whatever is done: the child. Since each child is a unitary individual, whatever services are provided are—or should be—child-centered.

Therefore, all of the major forces—families, agencies, institutions—that impinge on the child must be considered, and their varied viewpoints understood and respected.

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The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) is an independent, nonprofit research and development institution established in 1966 to assist education, government, community agencies, business and labor in improving quality and equality in educational programs and processes by:

- Developing and disseminating effective educational products and procedures
- Conducting research on educational needs and problems
- Providing technical assistance in educational problem solving
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